



Technology

Fixing leaks in our talent and information pipelines

In this week's Thought Leadership Roundtable, Scott Jones of Eleven Fifty Academy and Jason Johns of Sondhi Solutions tackle the problem of recruiting and retaining top tech talent and discuss the advantages of being a technology company in Indiana.

Q: The Great Resignation has made the Indianapolis technology talent market tighter than ever. What are some strategies for recruiting and retaining tech talent?

JASON JOHNS: Traditional compensation and benefits are important, but company culture plays a major role in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest. Top candidates want to be at companies that support their career growth and personal development. They expect to be able to flex work locations

and schedules. Transparency and intentional communications from senior leadership are crucial to imparting a sense of ownership to passionate employees.

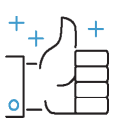
A company's hiring process can be the difference between landing the perfect new hire or not. Top candidates often have many opportunities in play and aren't willing to jump through unnecessary hoops. Before you post a position, look at your hiring process. Is it streamlined? Does your screening process reflect what you're looking for technically and culturally?



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SCOTT JONES: Eleven Fifty Academy graduated 900 new alums into this hungry tech-talent market in 2021, which means that our graduates are getting gobbled up incredibly fast and at historically high rates of compensation for entry level talent. Our programs are 16 times faster than a four-year tech degree, which means we are delivering tech talent fast to Indiana employers. The Academy has also been around for more than seven years, long enough to have hundreds of experienced local alums who are part of our tech network. Employers that work with us seem to be especially happy that we train students to integrate rapidly within an employer's team.

Q: How can businesses develop operational resilience to lessen the impact of an IT worker exodus?

SCOTT JONES: Having well-documented quality processes, excellent technical documentation, heavy cross-training, code reviews, pair programming, and a culture of teamwork (rather than silos) are important ways to mitigate the impacts of turnover. However, retention is more important than ever, because, as we all know, it is significantly more expensive to recruit and ramp-up than it is to retain.

JASON JOHNS: Being proactive in your efforts to retain tech talent is the best way to prevent an exodus in the first place. This means keeping up to date with compensation and benefits; encouraging skills growth; and inviting them to be part of strategic conversations and bring ideas to the table.

That said, in such a competitive talent market, companies should consider the loss of key team members in their business continuity planning. Having existing relationships with consulting and staffing firms can dramatically reduce the time it takes to recover from losing a critical team member. If a consulting or staffing firm already knows your environment, needs and culture, it makes it much easier for them to fill gaps both short and long term. Having a master services agreement and pre-negotiated rates in place beforehand also will make transition much more effective.

Q: How can small- and medium-sized businesses prepare themselves to recover from what seems like the inevitable ransomware attack?

JASON JOHNS: The number and sophistication of cyberattacks continues to rise and there is no indication that trend is going away. Businesses need to reframe their approach to cybersecurity. Rather than treating it as an add-on to IT, cybersecurity needs to be folded into your overall risk management practices. Bringing in experts, just as you would with legal, compliance or insurance, is one way to do that. Outside experts can objectively ensure your business is approaching cybersecurity holistically—including people, policies and processes and not just as a technology initiative.

Businesses should also make cybersecurity a cultural initiative. A recent report noted that nearly 90% of all data breaches started with employees who were deceived into providing access to company systems. We've seen that providing ongoing training to end users can have a dramatic impact on improving a company's overall cybersecurity posture.

SCOTT JONES: There are many exceptionally good cybersecurity firms that are very competent at protecting small- and medium-sized businesses on a part-time basis. Simple cybersecurity training for all employees to avoid basic attacks is important, along with periodic cybersecurity audits. Eleven Fifty Academy has both corporate and individual cybersecurity training at various levels of sophistication. The Academy also has a multi-million dollar "cyber range" that allows individuals and companies to "practice" in an environment of cyberattacks, except in a protected, safe environment. Practice and understanding are key to protection.

Q: Hybrid work or "work from anywhere" doesn't appear to be going away. How can businesses provide excellent, accessible employee experiences while ensuring productivity and engagement?

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SCOTT JONES: Hire employees who thrived in online learning. They already have the skills to succeed, to be productive on a schedule that works for them, and to thrive in a remote-working environment.

JASON JOHNS: Communication has been key to our employee productivity and engagement. Throughout the last two years of living through the pandemic, we have adjusted our policies to a hybrid work approach to meet the changing needs of our employees. We make sure to discuss, define and communicate goals and metrics to each employee so everyone is on the same page. We provide engagement through an All Company Teams channel to welcome new employees, announce achievements and celebrate life milestones, and we keep employees informed through monthly All Staff calls. When possible, we still hold deliberate onsite events for collaboration of our internal teams.

We still take advantage of video calls, without abusing them, and have found ways to connect with each other outside of the everyday work discussions. We established a Book Club that gives employees and leaders a chance to come together and to learn about each other in a unique way. We also created a day of service, where employees can meet each other face to face outside the workplace while giving back to our community.

Q: Advances in cloud computing have made technologies that were once only available to major enterprises available to small- and medium-sized businesses. What are some practical ways that smaller companies can harness this power to drive positive outcomes?

JASON JOHNS: Cloud technology has put amazing technology within the grasp of every business. Being able to use the same tools as the largest companies in the world is very exciting but can also be daunting.

Migrating email, productivity tools and document storage to the cloud is often a great first step. The migration processes are well documented, and you can often quickly realize a cost savings. It can be a big productivity increase for remote employees as well.

It can also be worthwhile to consider your on-premises environment. Hardware that is nearing its anticipated end-of-life can often help identify cloud migration opportunities. But be wary of the "lift-and-shift" approach to cloud migrations. Simply moving an application to the cloud can result in a higher total cost of ownership in the long run. On the other hand, taking the time to re-architect for the cloud can result in significant cost savings.

SCOTT JONES: Small and medium businesses today depend on core Internet-based tools, including Google Workspace apps, Microsoft 365 apps, Dropbox, Shopify, MailChimp, Salesforce, Hootsuite and beyond. Also, because of the burgeoning data requirements of even the smallest businesses, all businesses must incorporate secure file storage and backup solutions in the cloud.

Q: How does being an Indiana based tech company compare to national and global competitors?

SCOTT JONES: Tech companies in Indiana often can support better work/life balance for individuals and families, more loyalty among employees (less "options hopping"), less commute time, "more home for the money," and other benefits than traditional tech companies in Silicon Valley, San Francisco, Boston, Austin, Seattle and beyond.

JASON JOHNS: What I love about being a mid-sized company located in Indianapolis is our ability to get to know our customers personally while being able to reach customers regionally. We get to know their businesses but also create personal

relationships. Knowing what is going on in their family and being familiar with their personal as well as their business growth plans helps us build deeper relationships. Those relationships with our customers give us the ability to really tune in to their needs and build a technology roadmap for their unique environment.

The sense of partnership among Indy businesses is a huge asset as well. Being active in our communities, we see many opportunities and needs, and often we're collaborating with our clients and competitors to respond quickly and nimbly in ways that national and global firms can't.


Q: What can employers, educators, and policymakers do to support Indiana's growth as a national and global tech leader?

JASON JOHNS: By and large, Indiana has done an outstanding job creating a business-friendly economic and regulatory environment. And in many ways, remote work has leveled the playing field for us to compete for tech talent. As Big Tech firms have embraced allowing employees to work from anywhere, smaller communities can attract highly skilled workers. Investing in technology infrastructure like broadband, community WIFI, and secure utilities—combined with our low cost of living and Hoosier


hospitality—can create a compelling case for tech workers looking to escape our coastal competitors.

It's not enough to attract great talent, we must grow it, too. Continuing to invest in STEM programs in our schools—alongside traditional learning—is critical. As is providing opportunities for experienced workers to upskill and learn new technologies.


SCOTT JONES: Many have pointed out recently that tech talent expansion is the rate-limiting factor for Indiana to participate in the global tech economy. Traditionally, everyone seems to have been focused on "the degree." But the reality is the world of certificates, certifications, badges, and other skill-based micro-credentials solves many issues. For decades, people have talked about lifelong learning. In tech, this is a given. Supporting "training ecosystems" such as Eleven Fifty Academy, which serves a diverse range of students from all backgrounds, is critical. Hiring "nontraditional" employees, and recognizing the value they bring, strengthens the company's products and services by helping open up new markets as well as helping retain existing customers. It is critical to support learning of all kinds, from traditional degree programs to certifications. This will ensure that talent doesn't restrict Indiana's growth as a global tech leader.●



Jason Johns is president of Sondhi Solutions, a technology staffing, strategy, and services firm. Over the last 20 years, he has helped drive digital transformation in state governments across the United States. Johns is a member of Indiana's Executive Council on Cybersecurity.



SCOTT JONES is president and founder of Eleven Fifty Academy, one of the world's top-ranked software development and cybersecurity, full-immersion training bootcamps. Jones, an Indiana University computer science alumnus and former research scientist at the MIT AI Lab, has raised over \$200 million for his various companies, resulting in over \$5 billion of investor returns, and co-founded the world's largest voicemail provider.



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